

## Caribbean's Roman Catholic bishops urge swift completion of polling results verification

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Voicing their alarm at the current "governance crisis" in Guyana due to the ongoing post-elections controversy, the Roman Catholic bishops of the Caribbean yesterday appealed for the early completion of the process to verify the result of the March 2 general and regional elections.

In an open letter to the political leaders and people of Guyana, the 19 Roman Catholic Bishops of the English, Dutch and French territories which make up the Antilles Episcopal Conference (AEC) said the threat of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) necessitates the early completion of the process in order for there to be a functioning National Assembly.

The elections process has been marred by the controversy over the counting of the votes cast in Region Four, which has led to accusations of electoral fraud in light of irregularities that have been observed.

In their letter, the Bishops said they were "alarmed and dismayed" at the current post-elections governance crisis in Guyana. They noted that Bishop of Georgetown Francis Alleyne, in his response to an enquiry from the Bishops of the region, said that he was "saddened by the present impasse" and viewed the delay in completing the electoral process as "a great disrespect to the people of Guyana."

The Bishops said they were heartened by the persistent efforts of CARICOM leaders to facilitate a resolution of the crisis by organising a delegation to supervise the re-counting of the votes cast.. "This is an admirable regional initiative and positive witness to our Caribbean identity and shared

concern. In this vein the Bishops of the region express their concern and solidarity with the people of Guyana," they noted.

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However, they further noted that the efforts of CARICOM had been "thwarted" by the injunction restraining the Guyana Electoral Commission (GECOM) from recounting any ballots. As a result, they endorsed the pronouncement of Sir Shridath Ramphal, who has said Guyana "is being deprived of regional and international approval and the opportunity for global respect at a time when it matters most."

"Therefore, we encourage them to persevere in their commitment to facilitate a peaceful resolution," the Bishops added.

They also reminded the political leaders that there has generally been a history of fair and honest elections in the Caribbean and these have produced respected political leaders, ensured the preservation of the region's democracies, and contributed to the development of the people and their resources. "We trust that the present election in Guyana will follow this tradition," they said.

The letter also acknowledged the global COVID-19 pandemic and the Bishops said it requires "urgent attention." Against this background, they appealed to those responsible for the elections verification process to bring it to an early completion in order that a functioning National Assembly can see to the people of Guyana now under the severe threat of COVID-19.

"As Catholic bishops of the Caribbean, we urge the people of Guyana not to allow the flame of hope and resilience to be extinguished. We believe that God has empowered and inspired you throughout your political history to overcome many political and social challenges – challenges that have "tested you like gold in the furnace" (Wisdom 3:6) to shine brightly in the Caribbean," they wrote, while inviting the region to unite in prayer as they accompany the people of Guyana through the current challenging times.

The AEC brings together nineteen Dioceses and two Independent Missions comprising of 13 independent countries, three departments of France, two parts of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and six British Colonies.

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